

# **The sea will grow larger with our fall**

Written by dreamkatcha. Any related videos, as always, can be found on my YouTube channel.

None of this would have been possible without the fantastic resources generously provided by immensely talented emulator authors, and communities such as Hall of Light, Lemon Amiga, Lemon 64, World of Spectrum, Moby Games, World of Longplays and Recorded Amiga Games. Thank you for your tireless dedication to preserving the history of gaming.

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Psygnosis were often accused of producing (or championing) games that were little more than style over substance. Lemmings is their ultimate defence; style is the cherry *on* the substance... and it's no ordinary, bog-standard, artificially-preserved glace cherry either. We're talking about exquisite French Glamour Edoa cherries that infer an air of indulgence and flair. They meant business this time!



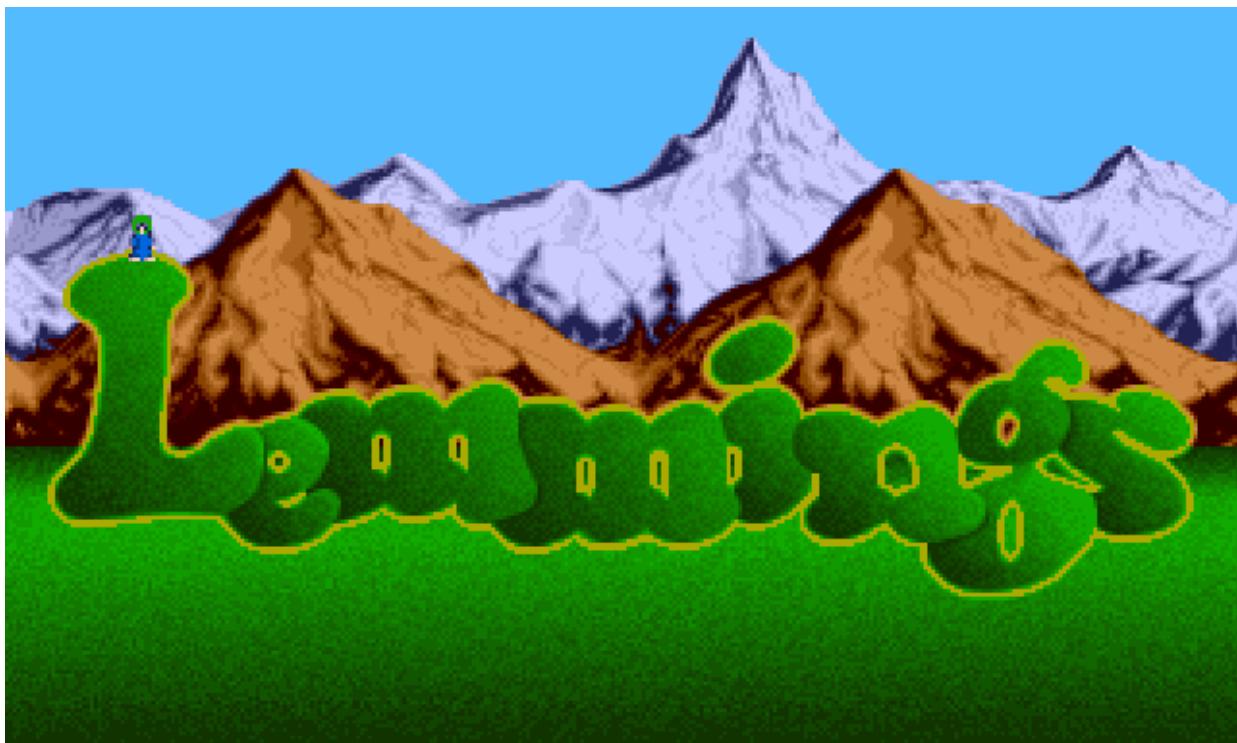
As much as it goes without saying, just for anyone born yesterday, Lemmings is a real-time, action, platforming puzzle game developed by DMA Design and published by Psygnosis in 1991 for the Atari ST, Amiga and DOS. It looks a heck of a lot like this...



It went on to spawn a thiddelybong of ports, sequels and spin-offs for every known piece of electronic circuitry on the planet... and probably a few board and Top Trumps games too.



Lemmings was a run-away, instant classic smash hit, embodying the benchmark by which all future puzzle games would be measured. Sales of the fledgeling Amiga version alone topped 55,000 copies on the first day of release. It was also largely responsible for shifting more Amiga 500 hardware than any other bundled game when included in the 'Cartoon Classics' pack along with Captain Planet, Bart Simpson vs. the Space Mutants and Deluxe Paint III. Consequently, as a bundle it sold in greater numbers than all others combined. Our funky-haired rodents could look forward to blue skies and green grass for the foreseeable future!



90% represented the *lowest* score awarded by the English-speaking press, the highest (in *several* instances in fact), 100%! Only the Swedish magazine, Svenska Hemdatornytt, didn't offer to have its babies, insulting DMA's magnum opus with a 72.5% score, though the reviewer, Derek dela Fuente, was clearly suffering from "delusions of ganja" at the time.

Amiga Power magazine professed Lemmings to be the "2nd best Amiga game of all time", a forerunner to games such as Command and Conquer in that it was "the first major game to introduce the 'indirect-control' concept", a facet that is today taken for granted in RTS games.



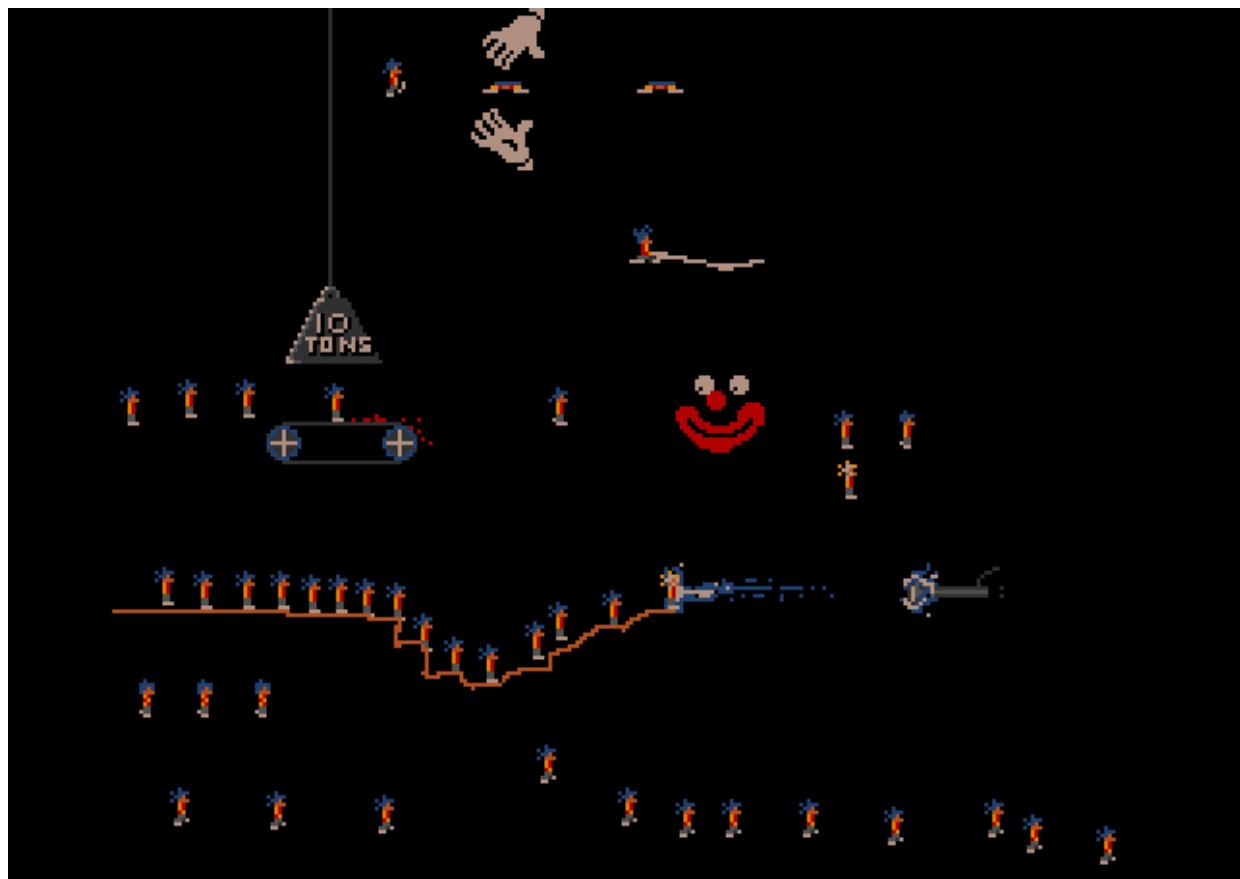
A head-twistingly bizarre turn of events given that the birth of the humble Lemming sprite was a serendipitous accident emerging from the development of DMA's mouse-driven, scrolling shoot-em-up, Walker, in August 1989.



*Go west, life is peaceful there.*

This was intended to be a sequel to their earlier game, *Blood Money*, from which the main sprite was taken and expanded upon. Nevertheless, it took an entirely new direction, the finished game bearing little resemblance to its forerunner.

Allocated a canvas measuring a measly  $16 \times 16$  pixels, graphician, Scott Johnston, was tasked by DMA founder and coder, Dave Jones, with creating the infantry that would oppose our protagonist's mech warrior. Lemmings coder, Mike Dailly, thought he could shrink the micro-men further without compromising our recognition of them as humans. Thus, one lunchtime, setting about the challenge of smushing them into an  $8 \times 8$  pixel grid.



While he achieved his goal, the sprite's animation was stilted, awkward and cried out for the next level of evolution. Graphician, Gary Timmons, tweaked his shaggy-haired babies and the result was the Lemmings we know and love today. They advance with a more fluid, floppy trundle within 8 frames of animation, taking 0.8 seconds to cycle. How something so tiny and primitive can exude such a vivid, charming personality is anyone's guess.

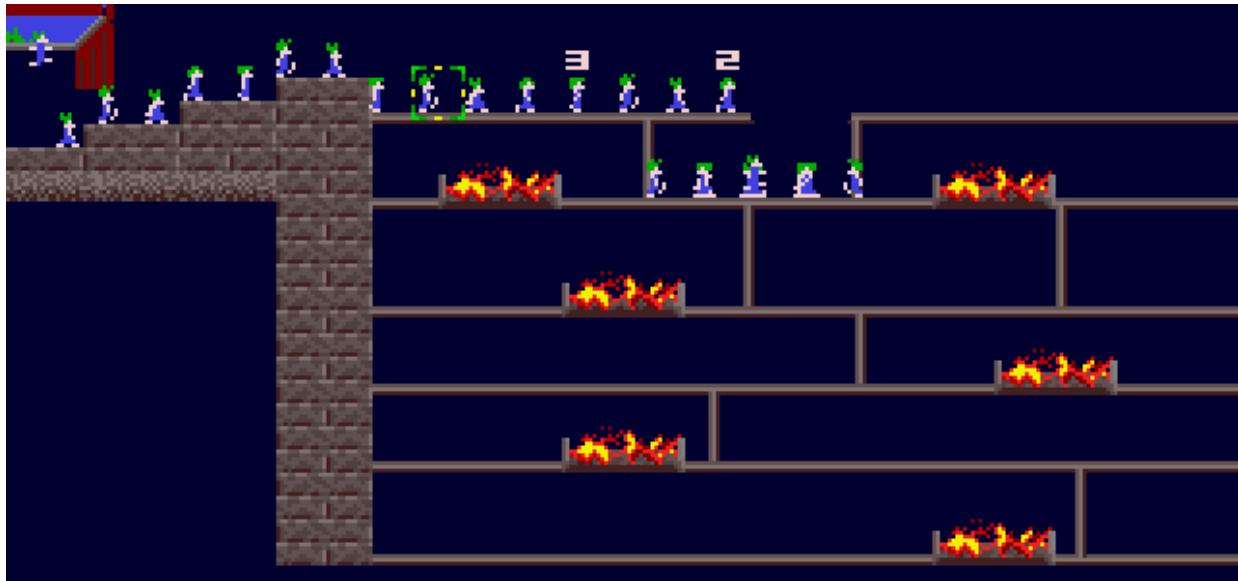


*Walkers, erm, walking in Blood Money. They'll never get away with that!*

Programmer, Russell Kay, saw this early experimental artwork and had the foresight to envision a game emerging from it. We also have him to thank for the name - 'Lemmings' was his suggestion.

As development picked up speed, Gary was assigned to completing all the animations in the game, while Scott took care of drawing the landscape backdrops. The Lemmings' blue and green trademark garb was chosen based on the PC's limited EGA colour palette to ensure that graphics were easy to share between platforms. Actually, as the first demo of the game emanated from a DOS PC, 'choice' is a bit of a misnomer here.

Scott Johnston's mother provided the voice of the first Lemmings, so every time you hear them shriek, "oh noooo!" followed by an explosive pop, spare a thought for the poor lady who had to be detonated from within to lend our rodents realistic sound effects. She's a star!



Progress far enough into the game and you'll be rewarded with a number of novelty homage levels. These are the work of Mike Dailly, featuring graphics and music taken from the first two *Shadow of the Beast* games, *Menace* and *Awesome*; some of Psygnosis' much-treasured back-catalogue. Regrettably, they were either omitted from the ports to other platforms, or modified to anonymise their astute allusions.



### *"A Beast of a Level!"*

Lemmings' original music was composed by Scott's younger brother, Brian Johnston, who got a bit carried away sampling copyright protected music, particularly from the contemporary rock genre. To avoid any legal ramifications, Timothy Brian Wright was commissioned to support Brian in getting the project back on track. Consequently, the final version instead includes a mixture of reworked, less copyright-sensitive classical and traditional tracks such as, "Here Comes the Bride", "London Bridge is Falling Down", and "Ten Green Bottles".

Amongst the most creative and memorable tunes are a mash-up of the festive carol, "O Little Town of Bethlehem" and the melody from "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly" movie, and "She'll Be Coming 'Round the Mountain" interspersed with "(How Much Is) That Doggie in the Window?".



*"What an AWESOME level!"*

In the development brief, one prominent goal was to produce a game with a fair and balanced learning curve that would allow everyone, no matter what their level of dexterity and expertise, to enjoy the game. What resulted was a series of 120 stages split across 4 steadily escalating difficulty levels (fun, tricky, taxing and mayhem). While the majority of gamers would never finish the 'mayhem' levels, they could still experience a sizeable chunk of what the game had to offer to get their money's worth.

Even if the means of solving a level isn't immediately obvious, you'll appreciate that DMA have gone the extra mile in helping you to work it out one way or the other. Some level titles include cryptic clues regarding how to proceed, which can mean the difference between success and tearing your fluorescent hair out.

Others can seem like irrelevant red herrings, but if nothing else, it's fun attempting to spot the pop-culture references contained within.



### *"Menacing"*

One of the rare occasions where the game could be accused of being unjust is in its awkward means of assigning attributes to Lemmings where they are accumulating rapidly in confined areas. Try turning one specifically into a *right-facing* bridge builder when dozens of them are criss-crossing the scenery in both directions.

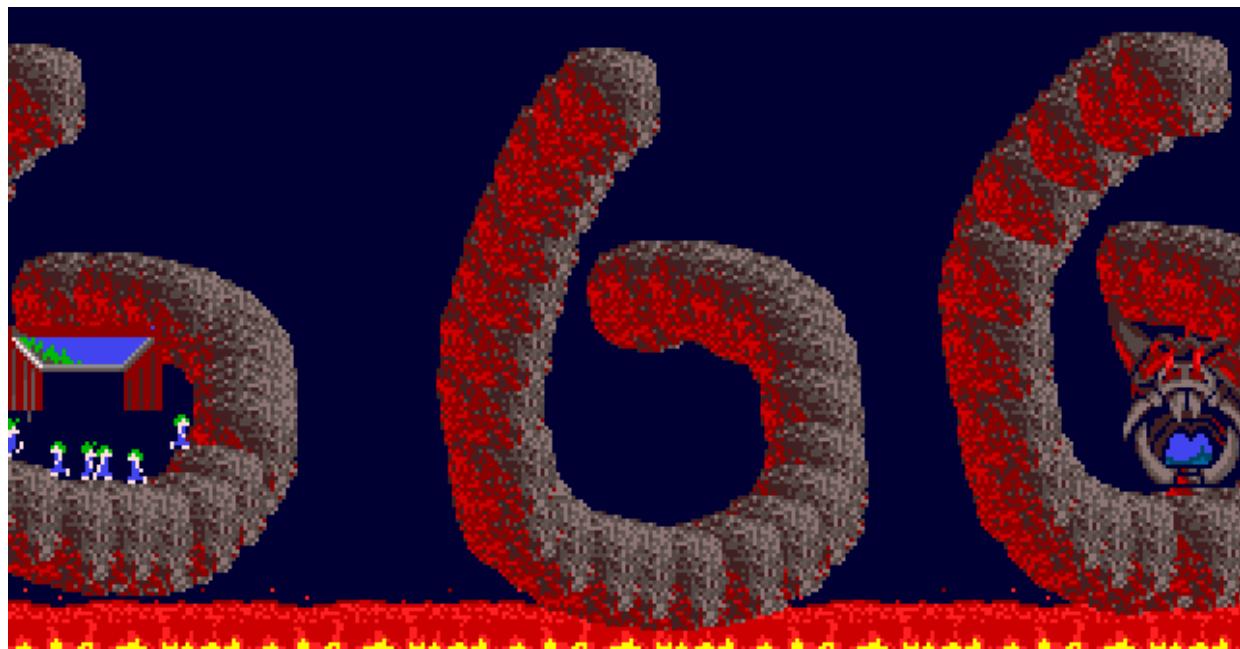


DMA note this is an issue, though designate it a design choice serving to augment the level of challenge. Clawing back order from the grasp of chaos is the game's lifeblood. Of course, the Lemmings are going to do their own thing regardless.

Thankfully a simple password system was sensibly implemented; a massive bonus in that it allows us to save our hard-earned progress, returning to pick up where we left off at a later stage. This and learning through trial and error really *do* improve our chances of reaching the game's denouement.



Lemmings' game mechanics can be summed up in a few brief sentences, whilst mastering its convoluted conundrums could take a lifetime... even if its cut unduly short through stress and obsessive late-night gaming sessions that run well into the twilight hours and beyond!

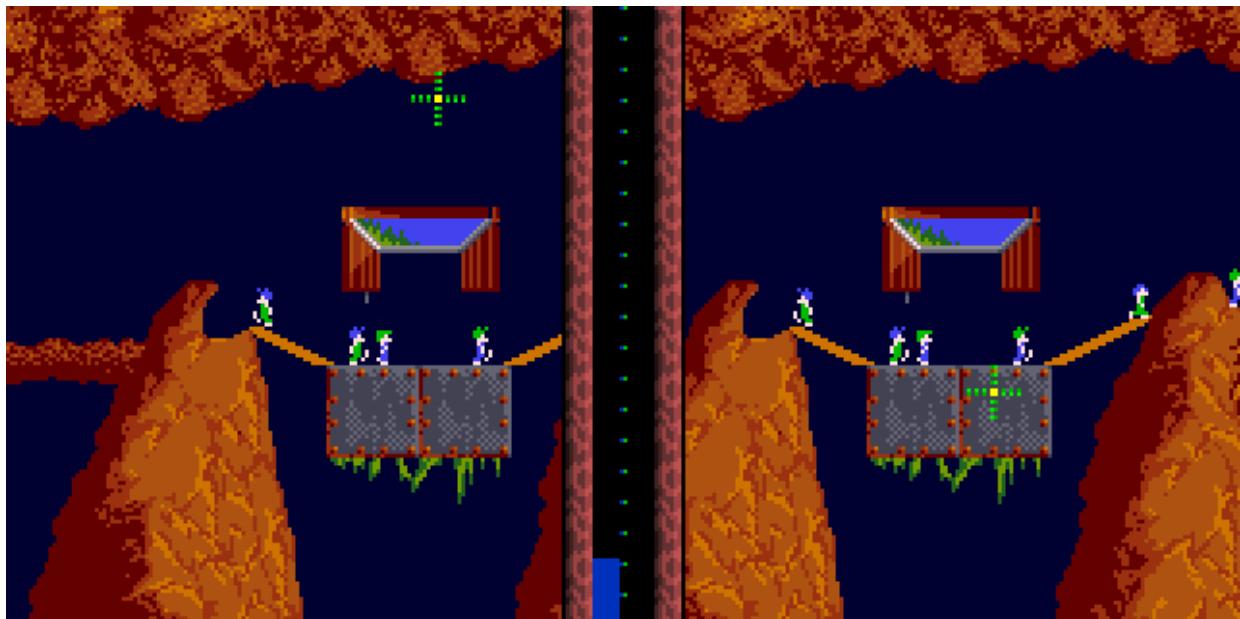


A predetermined number of critters - up to 100 - are released from their station onto a hostile landscape at the beginning of each level, and immediately set about blindly sauntering to their doom. They have no common sense, no self-defence mechanisms, or even a vague inclination to survive, yet are surrounded by sheer drops and lethal traps.



As their shepherd and guardian it is your task to confer upon them a range of 8 skills (including digging, building, blocking, climbing and so on), that will allow them to interact with their environment or each other, and hopefully bring about the circumstances that will lead them to safe harbour.

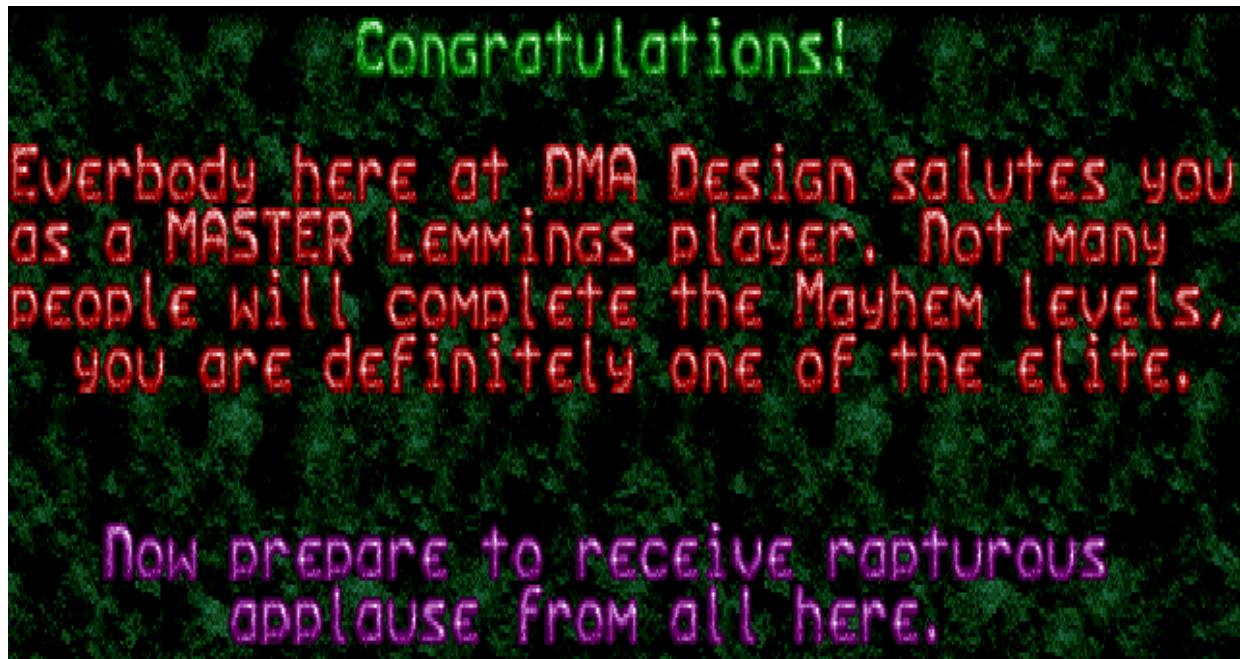
Rescue enough of the empty-headed vermin within a limited time-frame and we proceed to the next level, where we're presented with an entirely new challenge that will need to be tackled in a totally contrasting manner, with a different range and number of tools at our disposal.



Lemmings supports a split-screen, two-player mode using separate mice, where the goal is to guide more Lemmings into our exit than that of our opponent. 20 two-player levels are included, in which we can only assign skills to our personal set of Lemmings. Nevertheless, if our *opponents'* Lemmings are steered into our exit, they *also* count towards our score. Rescue two more Lemmings than your opponent and you'll begin the next level with a +2 quota, further improving your chances of beating them for a second time.

This two-player mode was originally going to be a full-screen affair using separate computers connected with a null-modem cable. I imagine the concept was dropped because the split-screen approach would have made two-player games a viable option for far more people.

If you ever manage to tick off completing the 25th mayhem level on your 'things to do before I die' list, you may be left feeling a little underwhelmed by the finale. We're met with a rudimentary congratulatory text message followed by a picture of a Lemming encircled by the game's producers.



I was half-expecting my toiling preservation of the rodent species to spark an evolutionary shift, leading to the birth of a super-race of Lemmings who would go on to cure cancer. At the very least, to devise a way to plug pigeons, preventing them from releasing their 'ballasts' on unsuspecting pedestrians mid-flight.

Personally I felt a bit short-changed after I'd slogged my way towards an early grave, completing each and every level...

vicariously by passively watching *competent* players on YouTube.



Since its inception in 1991, Lemmings has been ported to 30 diverse platforms, by 2006 selling in excess of 15 million copies worldwide. You could be deeply engrossed in a pixel-perfect remake in your web browser 5 seconds from now, such is its fans' prolific dedication to the art of recreating Lemmings' unparalleled magic.

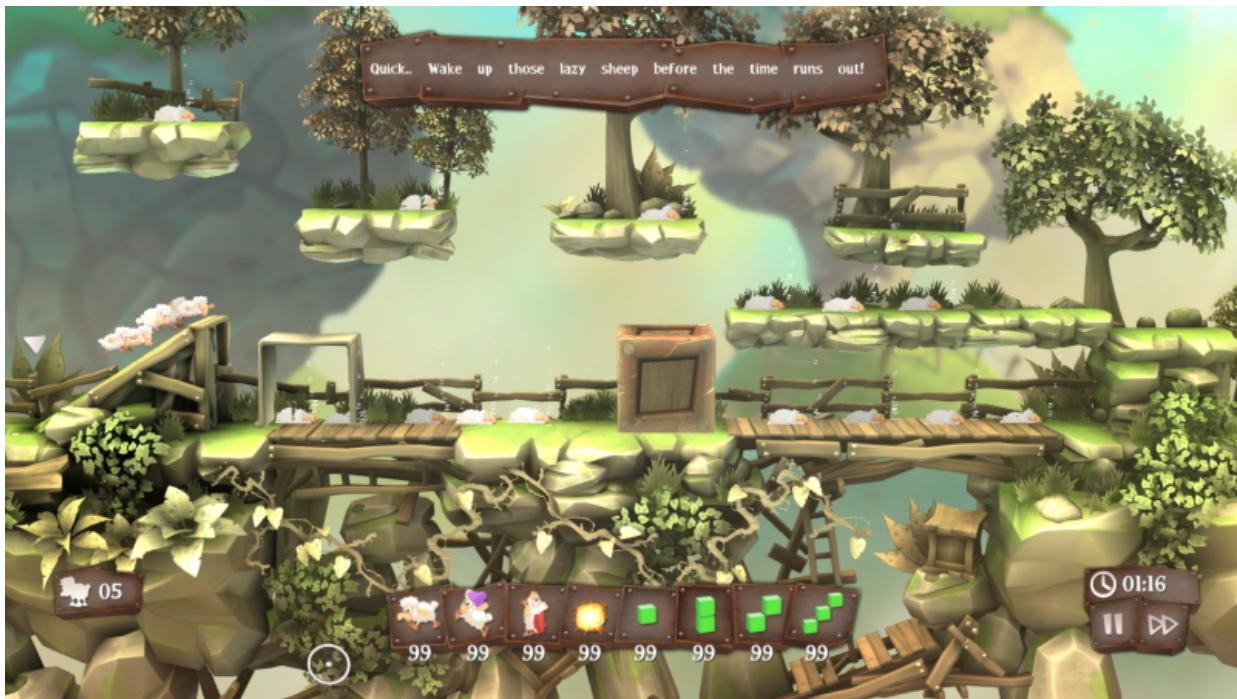
In terms of modern hardware, a PSP remake was released by Team 17 in 2006, which includes all 120 of the original levels plus 36 brand new ones, DataPack support and a level editor with online social sharing facilities. In the same year, it was ported for the PS2 by Rusty Nutz for use with the EyeToy, and then in 2007 a similar remake was released for the PS3.



iOS users were very nearly graced with a port of their own in 2010, only Sony (who now own the rights to the Lemmings IP) issued a cease and desist order to the developers, Mobile 1Up. Instead, a de-Lemminged version was released the following year as, 'Caveman'.



Amongst the most notable clones is the open-source, Pingus, released for Linux in 2003, subsequently ported to Windows and OS X, and Team 17's Flockers (opening the floodgates for 'Meet the Flockers' jokes) released in 2014 for PC, PS4 and Xbox One. Here the Lemmings have been supplanted with copyright-safe penguins and sheep respectively.



Quite possibly Psygnosis' finest hour, Lemmings is a genuinely unique, original concept replete with wit, imagination and a fiendish 'one more go' allure. It's the perfect blend of strategy and action with gameplay mechanics approaching Tetris levels of addictiveness.

Lemmings is the one puzzle game that even appeals to people who don't like puzzle games. The no. 1 game people with no patience dedicate their undivided attention to for unhealthy swathes of time. The game that officially, unequivocally confirmed the *myth* that Lemmings possess a hard-wired impulse to commit suicide. And the only game where en masse, self-imposed annihilation is as entertaining and satisfying as success. How many precious Amigas were spared decimation due to the presence of the virtual nuke, rage-quit option?



My one and only reservation is that DMA haven't left me any scope to cynically mock their work for cheap laughs, making myself feel big and clever, without ever having contributed to the herculean task of putting together a complex computer game.

There's only one thing in the universe that's better than the sound of a Lemming 'boinging' like a spring into the safe arms of a level exit, and that's watching a throng of them, kitted out in Santa outfits, lollaping across a snow-capped,

candy-strewn landscape to the dulcet tones of a Jingle Bellsed up Amiga mod tune in 'Holiday Lemmings'.

